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January 23, 2007

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Democrats Advancing the State of Our Union for Latinos

In November 2006, Americans voted to take the country in a much-needed new direction by electing Democrats to lead Congress. As we move forward, Democrats are taking care of the priorities our nation values. Senate Democrats renew our commitment to working with the Latino community to advance a common-sense agenda for the 110th Congress that improves the state of our union for Latinos and all Americans. The first ten bills introduced by Senate Democrats in the 110th Congress included legislation to support our troops and strengthen our military, make college more affordable, improve the Medicare prescription drug program, raise the federal minimum wage, and advance comprehensive immigration reform. Together with the Latino community, Democrats can, and will, take the country in a new direction.

Securing Our Nation and Supporting Our Troops

- As of July 31, 2006, there were 24,188 Hispanic officers and enlisted soldiers deployed.
- As of January 6, 2007, 327 Hispanics had died in Operation Iraqi Freedom (10.9 percent of the total 2,998 deaths), the single largest number of casualties for an ethnic/racial minority. In addition, Hispanics number 1,386 of the 22,834 wounded in Operation Iraqi Freedom.
- As of January 7, 2007, Hispanic service members were the single largest number of casualties for an ethnic/racial minority (31 or 8.8 percent of the total 352 deaths) in Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. In addition, Hispanics number 59 of the 1,091 total wounded (or 5.4 percent).

On the first day of the 110th Congress, Democrats introduced **S. 8**, the *Rebuilding America's Military Act*, which expresses the sense of Congress that Congress should:

1) restore and enhance the capabilities America needs to protect her people and her interests around the world; 2) enhance the readiness of the Armed Forces, including the reset of military equipment worn out in Iraq, and return unit combat readiness to the necessary levels; and 3) support the men and women in uniform, including the members of our National Guard and Reserve forces, through the provision of quality health care and enhanced educational assistance. **S. 8** is only the first of what will be many efforts made by Democrats to support American servicemen and women and their families in the 110th Congress.

America's fight against terrorism also remains unfinished and our country is not as secure as it should be. It is past time to craft a strategy and build the capabilities that will help us win the war on terror and defeat violent extremism. Senate Democrats are committed to continuing our call on President Bush to change course in Iraq and bring the war to a successful close, and to focus on bringing real security for our nation.

Deploying additional forces to the region would be a tragic mistake and is not a way forward. President Bush stands nearly alone in this strategy. Military generals, the American people, and even many Republicans agree: the time has come to transition our military mission, pursue a political and diplomatic solution, responsibly redeploy our troops, and end our open-ended commitment in Iraq.

Increasing Educational Opportunities

- Hispanics are significantly less likely to complete high school than their non-Hispanic White peers. Only an estimated 53.2 percent of Hispanic students who enter ninth grade will complete the twelfth grade and graduate with a regular diploma.
- Latinos are less likely to be enrolled in institutions of higher education. Only 24.7 percent of 18-24 year old Hispanics are enrolled in higher education institutions.

Senate Democrats recognize that a quality education is often the first step on the road to achieving the American dream and that Latino students deserve the opportunity to attend college. **S. 7**, the *College Opportunity Act of 2007*, which would make a college education more affordable by increasing Pell Grants and providing more favorable student loans and other benefits, was one of the top ten bills introduced by Senate Democrats.

Senate Democrats are committed to fighting for programs that support Latino educational opportunities such as the DREAM Act, Even Start, Head Start, Drop Out prevention, Title I, GEAR UP and TRIO (college prep programs), vocational and adult education programs, migrant educational programs and after-school programs, and programs that support English language learners. In fact, Democrats unanimously opposed a Republican budget reconciliation bill that cut \$12 billion in funding to the federal student loan program, a program open to all across the economic divide, including students from middle-class families. Senate Democrats will work in the 110th

Congress to fund current federal educational programs and strengthen educational opportunities for Latino students.

Improving Access to Health Care

- Latinos experience the highest uninsurance rate in the nation. According to U.S. Census data, 32.7 percent of Latinos lacked health insurance in 2004, and almost one-half (46.8 percent) of Hispanic men ages 18-24 didn't have any type of health insurance.
- Latino children experience the highest health uninsurance rate in the nation. Studies show that 21.9 percent of Hispanic children are uninsured, nearly twice that of any other racial group (Black; 12.5 percent; Asian; 12.2 percent) and almost three times that of non-Hispanic White children (7.2 percent).
- Nearly four in ten Latino Medicare beneficiaries lack prescription drug coverage for part or all of the year.

In the 110th Congress, Democrats are committed to ensuring affordable, equitable, and quality health care. On the first day of the new Congress, Senate Democrats introduced **S. 3**, the *Medicare Drug Price Negotiation Act of 2007*, which would improve Medicare's prescription drug benefit program to ensure that all people with Medicare have access to the fairest prices for their prescription drugs. Democrats plan to evaluate the new program to ensure that it is actually working for seniors and people with disabilities, and not leaving them confused and frustrated.

Democrats believe that health care access is essential to our nation's well being and recognize that Latinos are particularly affected by health uninsurance, disparities, and barriers to access. Top priorities include lowering the number of uninsured Hispanic Americans, narrowing health disparities in racial and ethnic minority communities (including ensuring cultural competency and language access), promoting preventive health care programs such as "*Promotoras de Salud*," and making prescription drugs more affordable for the elderly. Democrats are committed to ensuring that *all* Americans receive affordable and quality health care.

Advancing Economic Prosperity

- Latinos had a lower per capita income (\$14,483) than non-Hispanic Whites (\$25,036) in 2005.
- Latinos are overrepresented among minimum-wage workers; they make up nearly 12 percent of the United States workforce, but represent 19.2 percent of those who would benefit from a minimum wage increase. The group of earners earning just above the minimum wage (minimum wage + \$1) would also greatly benefit from an increase.

Last year, Democrats promised to seek better pay for working Americans, starting by raising the minimum wage. The federal minimum wage has not been increased since 1997. Since that time, the cost of living has increased and the purchasing power of the wage has eroded by over 20 percent. Today, a full-time federal minimum wage earner takes home only \$10,712 per year, before taxes, which is almost \$6,000 below the poverty line for a family of three.

On the first day of the 110th Congress, Democrats renewed our commitment to raise the minimum wage by introducing **S. 2**, the *Fair Minimum Wage Act of 2007*. **S. 2** would increase the federal minimum wage from \$5.15 an hour to \$7.25 an hour in three steps over two years. This raise would significantly benefit (directly and indirectly) nearly 13 million workers, or 10 percent of the workforce. Of those who would benefit, more than 60 percent are women, and approximately 19 percent are Latinos. Moreover, the parents of nearly six million children will receive a raise, helping them to better care for their families. In the 110th Congress, Democrats look forward to working with Republicans to pass the *Fair Minimum Wage Act* and are dedicated to helping American workers realize the dream of economic stability.

Prioritizing Immigration Reform

- The number of undocumented immigrants living in the United States has continued to increase steadily for several years, reaching an estimated 12 million.

Senate Democrats introduced **S. 9**, the *Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act of 2007*, as one of the first ten bills in the 110th Congress. Democrats respect our history as a nation of immigrants and will renew our commitment to working in a bipartisan manner to pass fair, tough and effective immigration reform that establishes a path to earned citizenship for undocumented immigrants, creates a temporary worker program, eliminates family backlogs, and increases employment and border enforcement.

Last year, opponents of reform in the House of Representatives rejected the Senate-passed legislation. This year, Democrats look to President Bush and Republican supporters of comprehensive immigration reform to help us enact this important legislation for the good of our nation.